

**Robinson Jeffers**

**THE MAN *and the* ARTIST**

*by*

**GEORGE STERLING**

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GEORGE STERLING



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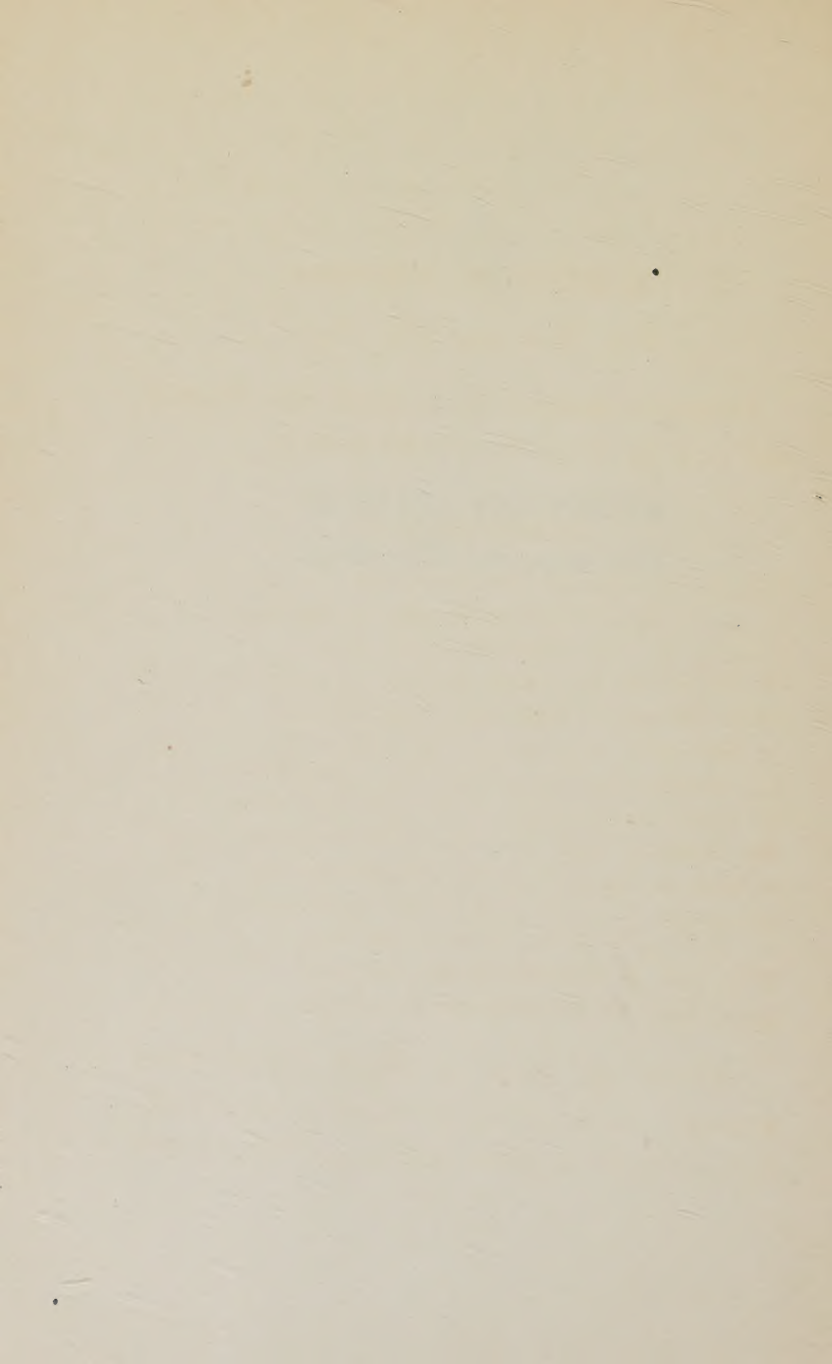
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ROBINSON JEFFERS

*The Man and The Artist*





## ROBINSON JEFFERS

### *The Man and The Artist*

IMAGINE picking up a small-town weekly  
and coming on such a sonnet as this!

#### COMPENSATION

Solitude that unmakes me one of men  
In snowwhite hands brings singular recompense,  
Evening me with kindlier natures when  
On the needled pine wood the cold dew condense  
About the hour of Rigel fallen from heaven  
In wintertime, or when the long night tides  
Sigh blindly from the sanddune backward driven,  
Or when on stormwings of the northwind rides  
The foamscud with the cormorants, or when passes  
A horse or dog with brown affectionate eyes,  
Or autumn frosts are pricked by earliest grasses,  
Or whirring from her covert a quail flies.  
Why, even in humanity beauty and good  
Show, from the mountainside of solitude.

“About the hour of Rigel fallen from  
heaven”—who among the many score of Cali-  
fornia’s lesser singers could pen a line of such

austere magic? And even Bierce himself has concluded none of his satiric verse with so quietly terrible a thrust at the race of mortals.

It is a sonnet at once modern in manner and highly individual in character, obviously the work of a stern and dissective soul, burdened with few illusions, or none. It is by our western genius, Robinson Jeffers.

It is a perilous business, the attempt to appraise genius. "Genius," wrote Whistler, "happens. No prince can command it. No hovel is safe from it." The term, too, is grossly misused, and we have come to the practice of calling any person of uncommon talent "a genius."

But the gift, fortunate or not, is more than that. Implicit in its sense is the element of originality, the style of the artist, handle he clay, paint or words, being so strikingly his own that it cannot be mistaken for that of another. In the case of the poet, he may express himself in traditional forms, or in those we call "modern"; but in either event his work, if he is indeed a genius, will have that

highly individual quality that cannot be found elsewhere. It is his own, portion of the woof of his inmost being. It may be imitated, but until he wrote, that especial pattern was not on the looms of art.

I think that the poetry of Robinson Jeffers amply complies with the law I have indicated. One could pick, unerringly, a poem by him from a stack of thousands of others. In all that collection there would be no other that could be mistaken, by a discerning eye, for one of his. And while it is true that there is no poetry that does not, however tenuously, stem from that of former poets and betray, however faintly, their influence, nevertheless the work of genius will be more decisively its own than that of the prior masters, and this to such a degree that such influence is often a thing to be patiently or shrewdly verified.

Such derivative touches as may appear in the work of Robinson Jeffers are from the phantom styluses of the great Greek tragedians, Aeschylus and Sophocles. No other influences greatly intervene, unless they be a

breath from the winter woods of Emerson, and occasional gleams from the iris-ink of Keats. It will perhaps become the fashion, what of the long sweep and surge of his lines, the reach of his imagination, to claim that he stems from Whitman. Such would be the most obvious criterion. But their dissimilarities are too great to imply any close relationship. Jeffers is incredibly more lithe and rhythmic in his lines than the elder poet, and in other details the difference is even more marked. Whitman slips but infrequently into beauty: Jeffers' lines glow or blaze with a thousand manifestations of it—no facile nor superficial beauty, but one soaring far and high in imagination. Whitman seems to have taken, all too often, an almost perverse pleasure in presenting his ideas as shabbily and awkwardly as possible. Jeffers falls into no such penurious egotism: his pace is the pace of a Titan, but not a hobbled, stumbling one. And when we come to deeper, if no more important matters, he immensely exceeds the grey singer in scope and significance of vision.

He deals with the cosmos, Whitman with the democracy of termites. His "shadow of a magnitude" far outlaps the penumbra of the elder poet. And he has but scarcely begun to sing!

In tracing his poetic blood, one looks, as usual, for the Celtic strain, and finds that his paternal grandfather came to America from Ireland. His father, William Hamilton Jeffers, LL.D., was a man of wide scholarship in languages, especially Latin, Greek, Hebrew and Arabic. He travelled much in Syria and other portions of the Near East, and was fifty-two years of age when Robinson Jeffers was born. He had married a girl twenty-three years his junior, the beautiful and vivacious Annie Robinson Tuttle, who had been left an orphan and was brought up by a wealthy Pittsburgh family. Both parents have but lately died.

They had but two children, John Robinson Jeffers, our poet, born in Pittsburgh in 1887, and Hamilton Jeffers, born seven years later.



The latter is at present engaged in astronomical work at the Lick Observatory.

When Jeffers was five years old he was taken to Europe by his parents, visiting France, Italy and Switzerland. The trip was repeated the next year, England and Scotland being visited, as well as the Continent. For several years after that he lived at "Twin Hollows," his father's country home near Sewickley, not far from Pittsburgh. Here he spent much time under his father's tutorship in the classics. Again abroad, from the age of twelve to fifteen, he attended school at Vevey, Lausanne, Geneva, Zurich and Leipzig, and during the summers of those years went on walking-trips with his father, in the Swiss Alps, one jaunt being from Italy up into Switzerland.

The family then returned to America, where he entered the University of Western Pennsylvania, at the age of sixteen; but within a year they moved once more, this time to Pasadena, California. The poet then entered Occidental College, from which he was grad-

uated, with the bachelor's degree, at the age of eighteen. He then took a post-graduate course in English and languages at the University of Southern California, where first he met Una Kuster, later to become his wife.

His parents again left America for Europe, he accompanying them, and in 1907 he entered the University of Zurich, but, dissatisfied with its curriculum, and chafing under parental supervision, returned again, via Holland, to the Pasadena home, and became a student in the medical department of the University of Southern California. He had no intention of becoming a practicing physician, but desired the general information, and gave his time mostly to bacteriological work.

After two years his parents returned, and he went with them to Seattle, where, wishing out-of-door occupation for a change, he entered the forestry department of the University of Washington. He remained there but a year, then went back to southern California, where, in another year, he being then at the age of twenty-five, he came into a legacy from



an uncle, being thus left independent. He then took up his residence at Hermosa Beach, passing the days in verse-writing and swimming, till, in 1913, he married the gifted and beautiful Una Call Kuster, with whom he moved, in August, 1914, to their permanent home in Carmel.

It had been their intention to live in Europe, but the World War prevented. Their twin boys were born in 1916. Jeffers endeavored, at the United States' entry into the war, to join the aviation corps, but before a necessary nasal operation could be performed, the conflict came to an end. Since that time he has never been farther afield than the Lick Observatory!

Jeffers began to lisp in numbers at the early age of ten, and when fourteen years old won a prize in a competition held by *The Youth's Companion*. It would be interesting to see the original draft of that poem, which may still be among the archives of the magazine. Later, when his powers were nearer maturity, he submitted poems, for a year, to sundry

magazines, and, these proving inappreciative, quit in permanent disgust. Editors now desiring work from his hand will have to request it.

The Jefferses bought several acres of land at Carmel, and built their house on a low bluff hardly a hundred feet from the foam-line of the Pacific, where it breaks on the granite walls of Mission Point. It faces directly on the sea. Southward, the beautiful Carmel River enters the ocean at a yellow beach, and beyond the great hills of the Santa Lucia range go down abruptly to the Pacific. Eastward, the valley of the Carmel reaches in changing colors, with the old mission of San Carlos a half-mile distant; while northward, curved like an elephant's tusk, reach the mile-long, ivory-colored sands of the main Carmel beach, loveliest of America's shore-lines. It may be said that no home could lie in a more magical and inspiring location, for the beauty of the spot should make poets, expressive or inarticulate, of all beholders.

The Jeffers home, garage and all, is built

of ocean-worn boulders of the grey Santa Lucia granite, all brought from the shore below. And soon after the completion of the house, the poet entered, unaided, on a task that took five years for its completion—namely, the erection of a thirty-foot tower of the same boulders, all of which (and some were indeed massive) he carried or wheeled from the little inlet whence came those used to make his house. The tower is completed at last, and looks fit to endure long after the English speech has become one of the dead languages. Its ground floor, of two rooms, is used as the rainy weather resort of the glorious twins, Garth and Donnan, now aged ten. The next floor is given to Mrs. Jeffers, who is devoted to Irish folk-songs, and has installed there a small organ. And the third floor, scarcely large enough to hold a hog-head, is often used by the poet himself as a work-room. Above this, granite steps lead to a turreted platform from which a magnificent view is afforded of valley, forest, mountains and ocean. There is also a socket to hold a

flag-pole, though Jeffers is hardly to be appraised as a hundred per cent. American.

He was obliged to seek some small technical help in finishing the tower, at which time he wrote, significantly, these powerful lines:

### TO THE STONE-CUTTERS

Stone-cutters fighting time with marble, you foredefeated  
Challengers of oblivion

Eat cynical earnings, knowing rock splits, records fall  
down,

The square-limbed Roman letters

Scale in the thaws, wear in the rain. The poet as well  
Builds his monument mockingly;

For man will be blotted out, the blithe earth die, the  
brave sun

Die blind, his heart blackening:

Yet stones have stood for a thousand years, and pained  
thoughts found

The honey peace of old poems.

True—the race shall die; but ages before  
then our English tongue will have been absorbed into the universal language, translatable into, and preservable by which, only poems that depend on their weight of thought, rather than on their verbal magic and music,

stand any chance for what we are pleased to term "immortality." Jeffers' poems rank with such creations.

I have sketched briefly his ancestry, youth and environment. A personal description would have to note that he is built on heroic lines, physically and mentally—a good six feet in height, shoes lacking, slender, but powerfully limbed, and perhaps a hundred and seventy pounds in weight. In color he is between the brunette and the blond, bronzed by the sun, since he seldom wears a hat, and with the sternest, most searching blue-grey eyes that I have ever seen in a human face—a gaze more piercing than even that of Bierce's. In short, a more austere version of the Greek. And he always wears puttees, and a soft shirt, invariably open at the throat. The whole impression is that of a pantherlike liveness and strength. Indeed, as his lines would indicate, he was a mile runner at college, and was afterwards accustomed to swim miles to sea. Nor is he ever physically indisposed, except from

rare headaches, arising probably from eye-strain.

Jeffers is not shy, though he gives that impression, and, for that matter, is by no means inclined to sociability. He has a limited number of friends, for whom he is capable of disinterested affection, but he does not seek their companionship, nor does he care to make new acquaintances. This faculty of reserve and self-sufficiency, is, I think, a most valuable asset to him in a literary way, ensuring him the leisure and privacy so essential to his deeply brooding mind. He now seems to have no further desire for travel, hating as he does the physical contact with strangers that trains and steamers necessitate. But he is a most patient man, and never, I believe, becomes angry at anyone, even interviewers, being, for that matter, quite heedless of public opinion of his poems. He greatly dislikes, however, to talk about his own work, finding such conversation a difficult matter. Indeed, he seems much prouder of his Falcon Tower, as he has



named it, from the fact that such a bird used to haunt its top as the labor grew to an end. His output is mainly from the subconscious, as the sheerest poetry usually is. He is a slow worker, and re-writes but little, busying himself only in the morning. It is notable, in this connection, that he has an abnormally low pulse—sixty in the afternoon and but forty in the morning!

As to his philosophy of life, it seems to me that he may be classed with the Pantheists, for he identifies himself with all nature, as an atom in the infinite ferment of space. He believes, naturally, in the continued renewal of suns and their attendant planets, but not in individual immortality, though he has thoroughly investigated Spiritualism. He is, in a sense, utterly irreligious, as far as the dogmas of superstition are concerned. He accepts the fact of the tragedy of life, but thinks existence worth the while. He does not believe in punishment, nor in the taking of life, human or animal. Indeed, he has never killed

an animal, and is tender toward such creatures. As to his politics, he is a radical if anything; but he believes in permitting all lives to take their natural course, nor would he care to attempt to influence, materially, either the individual or society. It is significant that he thinks woman a drag and a drain on the creative artist.

Regarding his pleasures, it may be said that he is fond of motoring on the incomparable coast-line of Monterey County, as well as up the charming valley of the Carmel. Thither, too, he likes to take long walks with his family. He knows his French, German, Latin and Greek thoroughly, and reads the classics of those tongues no less than the prose and poetry of the moderns. Indeed, his is an up-to-date library. It is a strange thing to learn that he does not like music, to which, for all his sensitivity, he is anæsthetic as to its values, though it rasps him almost beyond endurance. "Just noise," he terms it!

So much, in brief, for the man. To turn

from personalities probably distasteful to him, let me speak of that which truly matters, the beacon-light of his poetry on our western horizon, as sudden and startling as the flare of a *nova* on the heavens of Time. His first book was one (now rare) called "Flagons and Apples," consisting mostly of love-poems. Though he would deny and disclaim it, the verses are entirely creditable to one of his years, and are full of beauty and sincerity. That was in 1912. But though he followed the book, four years later, with the far more significant "Californians," poems dealing for the most part with the drama of existence as it unrolled itself before his eyes, and with the matchless scenery of the Californian coast, it was not until the publication of his terrific "Tamar" that he began to enter into the fame so justly and inevitably his. "Californians" contains two very excellent sonnets, "Wonder and Joy" and "When I Behold the Greatest." Its high-water mark is, however, its splendid opening poem:

INVOCATION \*

O evening star deep in the deep west burning,  
Far over the faint line of flickering foam;  
A solitary star, and unreturning

But with return of night: thy sisters come  
Laughing out of the east, but thou declinest;  
Day wanes no faster than thou fliest home;

Thou wilt not, though in heaven, O divinest,  
Endure divided glory, nor too near  
Approach, nor multitude. Alone thou shinest.

Thou hast precedence in heaven: have it here  
In song, and in my heart that yearns afar  
Above the wave-tops toward thy splendor clear,

Lamp of the west, O loveliest wandering star!  
Thinking how oft at closing in of days  
Nameless, and evening respites of dim war,

My fathers looked from unremembered ways  
Up to thy guiding light; and swore at dawn  
To turn their shoulders dawnward, and still gaze

The whole day toward thy setting; and were drawn  
Out of huge Asia, past the Euxine sea,  
Northward of cloudy Caucasus, and on

\* Acknowledgment is made to The Macmillan Company for  
permission to reprint this poem.

Westward, free wanderers. They would look for thee  
At fire-lighting each night; but when thy face  
Was hidden, there they halted, eagerly

Awaiting thy new birth, and in that place  
Built huts, and plowed the field. Thy light renewed,  
They rose, and tracked westward the wilderness.

Now I, the latest, in this solitude  
Invoke thee from the verge extreme, and shoal  
Of sand that ends the west. O long-pursued,

Where wilt thou lead us now? What greater goal  
Gleams for our longing down the abysm of time?  
What weariness of body and worn soul?  
What farther west? What wanderings more sublime?

Shelley, surely, would have been proud to  
sign that poem, written before the days when  
"thee" and "thou" were crimes, and we made  
the bad bargain of exchanging emotion for  
sophistication.

It has been alleged that Jeffers, like Poe,  
adds an abnormal force to his æsthetic im-  
pact by choosing themes so dreadful as to be  
in themselves unforgettable. It is, in fact, a  
more difficult thing to triumph poetically  
with the normal. Nevertheless, an enduring

memory of a work of art, however dreadful, is certainly of more æsthetic importance than a fleeting impression of some mildly pleasing performance. Moreover, his use of such themes is far from invariable, and we see him bring to saner and deeper, if less fascinating, matters a beauty and divination as great as those found in "Tamar" and "Roan Stallion." For he is poet as well as philosopher in all on which he brings to bear the "fierce light" of his imagination, and his work is full of poems in which crystal and granite are equally in evidence. I have already quoted "To the Stone-Cutters." Let me add some lines from his majestic "Night." I know that this age has abjured the sublime, but when it has lost something of its cheapness, the great balance will swing upward once more.

"Truly the spouting fountains of light, Antares, Arcturus,  
Tire of their flow, they sing one song but they think  
silence.

The striding winter giant Orion shines, and dreams  
darkness.

And life, the flicker of men and moths and the wolf on  
the hill,



Though furious for continuance, passionately feeding,  
passionately  
Remaking itself upon its mates, remembers deep inward  
The calm mother, the quietness of the womb and the egg,  
The primal and the latter silences: dear Night it is  
memory  
Prophecies, prophecy that remembers the charm of the  
dark."

Is it for such felicities or for his longer poems that Jeffers will take on the imperial purple? Who can sit in judgment here? It seems to me that all share an equal quality. There is no waste stuff here, and quality being equal, the longer poems should attain the more irresistible momentum. I have called "Tamar" terrific: it is all of that, and gleams, in addition, with a hundred weird witch-lights of beauty—irised corporants and scarlet will-o'-the-wisps. It is strange to think that this age has bred, in its war on beauty, hearts that are sealed against such magic, final and inexplicable, as his description of a certain ocean-sunset—

"the sad, red, splendid light."

What constipated soul was it who wrote  
that no one is any longer interested in sunsets,  
not even poets? Let him try, in his own  
words, to equal that! And what of these  
lines?

"And the sea moved, on the obscure bed of her eter-  
nity. . . ."

"The eastwind ran like glass under the peeping stars,  
and the southwest wind  
Plowed in the blackness of the tree. . . ."

"The red hawk wings of the first dawn  
Streamed up the sky. . . ."

"The coals of ruby lichen  
That glow in the fog on the old twigs. . . ."

"It was twilight in the room, the shiny side of the wheel  
Dipping toward Asia; and the year dipping toward  
winter uncrimsoned the grave spokes of sun-  
down. . . ."

Let captious minds term "Tamar," if they  
choose, a tour de force; but this Aeschylean  
drama of the doubly incestuous House of  
Cauldwell and its ghastly inhabitants stands  
among the unforgettable dreams of art, as as-

sured of "immortality" as that of the House of Pelops. Its huge rhythms are those of the very ocean below the granite Falcon Tower, and for a symbol of it I am reminded of great serpents, coiled around high and translucent jars of colored poisons. Its folk are abnormal—true. How many of Poe's are not? Has history itself been made by mild and average personalities? And is art invariably concerned with the actions of the sane and happy, with the probable instead of the possible? And who are we, to clip the wings of the god and fit him with rose-colored spectacles?

"Roan Stallion," the poem that gives title to Jeffers' lately published book, which includes "Tamar," contains much of the tragic horror that informs the latter poem. Here too are the long, trampling rhythms, carrying in their surge something of the fateful rush of the breaking seas, and here too are the same sorceries of objective beauty, always inseparable from the work of this poet. Again I quote:

POETRY OF ROBINSON JEFFERS

---

“ . . . once thunder  
Walked down the narrow canyon into Carmel valley and  
wore away westward . . . ”

“Red rays cried sunset from a trumpet of streaming  
Cloud over Lobos, the southwest occident of the solstice.”

“ . . . after the leopard-footed evening  
Had glided oceanward. . . . ”

“ . . . the night  
Whitened up the bare hill ; a drift of coyotes by the river  
cried bitterly against moonrise. . . . ”

“Enormous films of moonlight  
Trailed down from the height. . . . ”

Of what can this incredible plot be a symbol, if indeed one is desirable? I have not put that question to Jeffers' taciturnity, and am not sure I care to. But I wish that the tale might have had a more dramatic ending, with the mad woman riding her colossal lover over some canyon-wall, even as Lee Cauldwell spurred his horse over the granite cliffs of the Mal Paso. As in "Tamar," the slate should be wiped clean, the dawn break on such a battle-field to reveal but the dead. Even Frankenstein's monster was not permitted to attain its pitiful hopes. The obstetrician of horror

must not permit such births to survive. The Greek poet never did.

"The Coast-Range Christ" is another drama, filled with that tragedy essential to literary greatness, of the sea-hills of Monterey County. Its plot runs far nearer to the margins of normality, but it loses little intensity or interest by reason of that. Here too the long lines, like an incoming surf, carry the reader irresistibly to the conclusion, but they are rhymed, a practice that Jeffers has abandoned; nor can I see that the rhyming adds to the æsthetic value of the poem. It marks, I dare say, the transition in his style from conventional forms to the windlike freedom of "Tamar" and the later poems. I shall not give the plot, good as it is, but wish to quote, as before:

"And the old Franciscan churchyard feels the wild gourd  
finger its graves."

"Golden-haired the gorgeous day came out of the valley  
to kill dreams."

"Sea-gulls weave a windy storm-dance over the shore at  
the Carmel mouth."

"Marvellous sorcery of the night, the splintered moon-  
gleams, the south wind gushing."

"Eating the reckless heart of joy with lips like fire through  
the loosened hair."

"Breakers flung black handfuls above the bar across the  
seafaring moon."

"Strength of the human soul to suffer or sin to its dream's  
uttermost

And forget it all in an hour and fling at the stars like a  
young hawk loosed."

I have elsewhere written that Jeffers clasps hands with the great Greeks across Time, and it has been said, truly perhaps, that Jeffers reaches the peak of his performance in his restatement of the tremendous Electran theme, his "The Tower Beyond Tragedy." And despite the power, splendor and intensity of the Elizabethans, one must go back to Aeschylus to find the match of this drama. It blazes with convincingness, drives on to its end like a hurricane, cries out its pathos, terror and beauty as though through brazen trumpets. There is no escape from its march and tidal onset. One watches the avengers of Agamemnon move to their task to the cold



music of swords and armor. Medusa glares from the palace-shadows, her serpents prefigured by the crawling blood from the breasts of Clytemnestra and her paramour. Here horror is redeemed by beauty, and the dreadful by the sublime.

Listen to the flaming eloquence of Cassandra:

"For me there is no mountain firm enough:  
The storms of light beating on the headlands,  
The storms of music, undermine the mountains—they  
stumble and fall inward.

Such music the stars  
Make in their courses, the vast vibration  
Plucks the iron heart of the earth like a harp-string,  
Iron and stone core, O stubborn axle of the earth, you  
also  
Dissolving in a little time like salt in water."

There is no line in this drama that is not alive and alert with an immense and conscious power, that does not shake with a foreboding passion of doom, while permeating all is a sheer and vital beauty. The poem is one of the glories of English literature. What lacks are eyes keen enough to see, souls strong

enough to bear, the huge weight of this drama and its mates.

Accompanying these four Titans of poetry, "Tamar," "The Coast-Range Christ," "Roan Stallion" and "The Tower Beyond Tragedy," tread several score of shorter poems, like sturdy sons at the sides of their parents, for they are of the same blood. None that is not significant, none that has not its memorable burden of thought, none but bears in its individuality the impress of the soul of its maker. I would refer you to the burning splendor of such a poem as "Choros," to the stern beauty of "Granite and Cypress," to the wing-sweep, for all their brevity, of "Fog," "Science," "The Torch-Bearers' Race," "The Cycle" and "Continent's End." There is no waste stuff here. Every line counts, enduring syllables cut deep into the granite of the race's records. Behind them one feels the momentum of a mind that has pondered long, deeply, and not without grave pain on the past, present and future of mortality, of the universe itself. Nothing here has been set down in

haste, whatever the temperature of the nebulae of dream in which these thoughts, like stars, took form. The soul here accepted without complaint the arena decreed, and wrestled in silence with those lions of grim surmise that the jungle of the Dark sends forth against the dreamer. The fight went on in solitude: its outcome is here for all to read that have "eyes to see." (It may be stated, parenthetically, that Jeffers' system of punctuation is one of those mysteries still unrevealed by the Divine Intelligence.)

It should be food for pride, in this age of ugliness, that these great poems have not had to beat beautiful and ineffectual wings in vain in the void. Hundreds of kindred and discerning minds have taken fire at the advent of these new poetic phenomena. Despite the recoil of certain titmouse souls from the terror of certain of his themes and the candor of their treatment, despite a few glib judgments and hollow pontifications, the trend of criticism has been vastly in favor of the work of Jeffers. Great poets should have

great critics, and one poet, at least, has been fortunate in his time and place. Harriet Monroe says justly:

"Here we have a stern and stately beauty, the expression of a harsh loneliness of soul which has studied the world afar off as it communed with sea and mountains."

And Babette Deutsch in *The New Republic*:

"Permanent things, edged with the light of our new knowledge of the world—permanent things torn up from the sea-floor of emotion. . . ."

Frank Ernest Hill, in a none-too-thoughtful estimate of Jeffers, says at least:

"The vitality is more important. It is the one undeniable fact about this extraordinary volume. Nothing since Whitman has had so vigorous a beat as these rough lyrics and fearless narratives of the Pacific Coast. No poet has made his people live—if only in flashes—more vividly than Tamar and David Carrow and other of Mr. Jeffers' characters. Whatever may be thought of this poet, his immense

vitality must be accepted and reckoned with."

And John Farrar:

"There is no question that Mr. Jeffers has amazing powers of expression. There are pages and lines of great beauty and strength."

Mark Van Doren says of "Roan Stallion, Tamar and Other Poems":

"It marches forth with several important new poems, one of which I am sure is a masterpiece. . . . 'The Tower Beyond Tragedy' is Mr. Jeffers' chief work to date and undoubtedly one of the great American poems."

And of the earlier "Tamar":

"Few recent volumes of any sort have struck me with such force as this one has; few are as rich with the beauty and strength which belong to genius alone."

And again in *The New Republic*, Edwin Seaver writes:

"No one, I think, can forget the thrill of discovery that heightened as page after page of 'Tamar' revealed an overwhelming poetic imagination, a firm grasp of dramatic values, a profound seriousness, and a fecundity that

danced at white heat through his 'mighty line.' It was an experience not to be forgotten. And this, not only because of the amazing poetry, but because here was the rare poet come among us who neither accepted nor rejected his America, but faced it for exactly what it was worth to him and used it as material for a more important end, for his visioned song.

"'Roan Stallion' is a magnificent achievement . . . whereas Whitman sang of an advancing republic rejoicing in its youth, Jeffers faces 'a perishing republic' from the heights of a tougher reality."

George P. West writes:

"A great new poet has arisen in California. Robinson Jeffers of Carmel is so far above and beyond all the men and women who play skillfully with words that his first book has left his readers breathless. Nothing so sensational has happened in the world of letters in our time as the sudden disclosure of his talent and genius by the publication in one volume for the first time of his work of twenty



years. . . . And in 'Roan Stallion, Tamar and Other Poems' he shows a power and magic and mastery of form so impressive that they beat down the critical instinct and loom as the gifts of a very extraordinary man."

William Rose Benét says: "It is fine to realize that there is work of such intensity and scope still being published."

And Benjamin De Casseres: "Robinson Jeffers is the great modern poet."

And Fannie Sinton Leitch, for whom some of Jeffers' themes have proved too overpowering:

"That one man can write with such strength and at the same time with so much delicacy is astounding."

And Percy A. Hutchinson in The New York Times Book Review:

"It may be questioned whether there is another poet writing in America to-day—or in England, for that matter—who can, when he so desires, write in so indelible a fashion as the author of 'Tamar.' Where, for instance, will this be matched?

. . . and surely her face  
Grew lean and withered, like a mask, the lips  
Thinned their rose to a split thread.

Or, finally:

Looking down (he saw) . . . the barn roofs and the  
house roof  
Like ships' keels in the cypress tops.

"Robinson Jeffers is not a poet for the adolescent; he is not a poet for the Puritan; he is not a poet whose conception is confined to the honeyed lyric and to conventional themes. . . . To us it seems that there are in this book pages, many, many pages, which are equalled only by the very great."

James Rorty, yet to be accused of fulsome praise, writes in the New York Herald-Tribune:

"It (Tamar) exhibits the maturity of a remarkable talent, which critical opinion will have to take account of and measure at leisure. I am convinced that no poet of equal importance has appeared on the American scene since Robinson. . . . A narrative style of ex-

traordinary intensity and resourcefulness. . . . Nothing so good of its kind has been written in America. In the shorter pieces, Mr. Jeffers deepens the impression of his sharp individuality, his developed and powerful style. . . . There is not a single undistinguished piece in the volume. . . . America has a new poet of genius."

And to quote from the critics of several other cities:

Denver News: "Mr. Jeffers is that rarest of finds, a real poet, a man with something to say and with his own instrument."

New York Telegram: "No such press has greeted a poet in a long time."

Time: "Now Jeffers is heard, unmistakably powerful, individual, a true racial poet chanting on his high Pacific headland."

The American Monthly: "An amazing book, full of strange passion and extraordinary daring. The first poem in the volume (Roan Stallion), unequalled in any language, recites the tragedy of an equestrian Pasiphae. . . .

Here and there are lines of terrible loveliness, sparks from the very anvil of genius."

Los Angeles Times: "The poetry of Robinson Jeffers is written with so much fire and intensity, is so new and daring and so unmistakably a spark struck from the flint of genius, that no one but a poet can hope to do justice to it. But it is fitting that some notice be given of it here, for Robinson Jeffers is certainly a major poet, and one of the greatest that America has yet produced."

The Parchment: "The high excitement kindled by a first reading of 'Night' does not dwindle with closer scrutiny. Each re-reading leaves me a little more firmly convinced that here is one of the finest of American poems. . . . Such passion, fertility and power are encountered rarely indeed. They make 'Roan Stallion' unquestionably the most exciting volume of verse of the last year."

So much for the critics, great and small. Remains to be said that most of the book-reviewers of his own state (California) have food for humiliation for their tepid, not to say

grudging, reception of Jeffers' work. Even the unanimity of praise with which it has been greeted by the keener-minded critics of the east will probably have no effect in convincing such niggards of their lack of critical acumen. There are those, unfortunately, who would not see the great wall of China until they had flattened their noses on it, nor feel the tug of Leviathan, though they had him hooked.

I have here endeavored to give a view of Jeffers' past and present, as far as his education and environment are concerned. To give the true report of his intimate psychology is another matter. I have known him personally for less than two years, and am of the opinion that a lifetime of acquaintanceship would be insufficient for learning the deep, and perhaps shifting, currents of his reticent and eternally brooding personality, that which Mark Van Doren so aptly terms his "soul of granite." That is perhaps not desirable. What we are, or should be, concerned with

are the poems he has written and is yet to write. There seem to be no authoritative voices dissenting from their beauty and strength—a fierce yet enduring beauty, a strength that goes for its sustenance to the very foundations of thought. That his musings are cosmic in their outlook, rather than concerned, as is the present fashion, with the miserable minutiae of human emotions and conduct, is to me cause for rejoicing: our auto-vivisection has ended in a network of necessary but microscopic capillaries, and our own faces, reflected in a muddy pool, are poor substitutes for the dawns and sunsets of the Time-horizon. For Jeffers gives us real thoughts, not mere whimsies and henids. Take the usual poem, strip it to the buff, and you will find, almost without exception, that nothing of moment has been said, or struggled for articulation. Take any of Jeffers: the contrast is startling. Here is a man who thought before he took up the pen. And if those thoughts seem at times to be born of the twi-



light and to lead to deeper shadow, is not that indeed the trend of our vaster tides of meditation? A meaningless universe may be scrutinized, but to one not enamoured of its many mirages the task need not necessarily afford especial gratification.

If I have seemed over-enthusiastic in my appreciation of the work of Robinson Jeffers, such enthusiasm is utterly sincere—and quite shameless. One of our great critics once wrote that he was haunted by one prevailing fear: that a genius would appear in the literary skies and be unseen or unappreciated by him. This not-all-unselfish fear we others may well entertain, in the quite creditable ambition to “name a star” before the time of its setting. Few of our great poets have had in their lifetime the praise and appreciation that were their due. I am far from sure that that was a good thing for their work: poets, I imagine, do their best when stimulated by approval, not when discouraged by inattention.

I know of no other poet who cares less for

the plaudits of the many, or even for fame in his own day and after death, than Robinson Jeffers. For all that, it is a shame to the race that the laurel should be set so often on dead brows, when only living ones may feel the glory of that pressure. What men will say of Robinson Jeffers in a hundred years I wish to say now, despite the attitude of the envious, the ungenerous and the blind. We are poor fish, most of us: all the more reason to listen to Jeffers when, in chorus with Nietzsche, he sings:

"Humanity, in the mold to break away from, the crust  
to break through, the coal to break into fire,  
The atom to be split.

Tragedy that breaks man's face  
and a white fire flies out of it; vision that fools him  
Out of his limits, desire that fools him out of his limits,  
unnatural crime, inhuman science,  
Slit eyes in the mask; wild loves that leap over the wall  
of nature, the wild fence-vaulter science,  
Useless intelligence of far stars, dim knowledge of the  
spinning demons that make an atom,  
These break, these pierce, these deify, praising their God  
shrilly with fierce voices: not in a man's shape  
He approves the praise, he that walks lightning-naked  
on the Pacific, that laces the suns with planets,

The heart of the atom with electrons: what is humanity  
in this cosmos? For him, the last  
Least taint of a trace in the dregs of the solution; for  
itself, the mold to break away from, the coal  
To break into fire, the atom to be split."

True, perhaps. But that humanity, however imperfect and transcendible, is yet, in its "still, small music," alone of import to itself, the flower of those infinities that it apperceives and contemplates. Than Robinson Jeffers, there is no deeper voice in the choir that sings its glories and its shames. Let him not weary of the singing, for humanity is life at its highest, blind in many ways, yet conscious of the suns that are to it but candles

"In houses of death and of birth."









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